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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000436

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TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR PHUM ASEC CASC FJ

SUBJECT: FIJI: BAINIMARAMA RESUMES STATE OF EMERGENCY;
BLAMES QARASE

REF: SUVA 433

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Commodore Bainimarama brought back Fiji's state of emergency on Sept. 6, after a three month hiatus, in order to respond to political posturing by deposed PM Qarase, who returned to Suva last weekend and immediately began to make public statements critical of the interim government (IG) and the Fiji military (RFMF). Bainimarama suggested Qarase was attempting to attract an invasion by Australia. Drawing a comparison with Pakistan, Bainimarama threatened to exile Qarase again. Suva streets remain quiet. We hear reports that Bainimarama relies too much on sycophants, and doesn't realize his IG is unpopular. It appears the IG, which had declared Qarase irrelevant, underestimated his continuing political appeal. Now there is a scramble to put a damper on. One way that may be happening is by making public mention of the "military council" which has mostly operated behind the scenes in setting policy, with the interim cabinet the public face of the IG. Now the message is clear: the military remains very much in charge. End summary.

Bainimarama changes mind about Qarase threat

¶2. (U) Interim PM Bainimarama re-invoked Fiji's state of emergency as of noon today, Sept. 6. Under the regulations, a state of emergency lasts for a month and can be renewed. The previous state of emergency imposed after the December coup had ended May 31, when the interim government (IG) reluctantly complied with an EU demand. Bainimarama said the focus is deposed PM Qarase, along with his SDL Party spokesman Kinivuwai. Per reftel, before Qarase's return to Suva last weekend, Bainimarama suggested Qarase is irrelevant, not a problem. But Qarase immediately resumed a public posture and has received considerable media attention, both locally and abroad. Qarase has alleged military threats and military surveillance against him (Bainimarama has declared those claims are lies); and while Qarase immediately offered his services to the IG to help move Fiji rapidly to elections, he also has criticized IG policies and senior leaders publicly.

Exile threat ala Pakistan? motive Australia?

¶3. (U) Bainimarama told the media today the IG had been "very lenient" on Qarase by allowing him to return to his family and prepare for his court case..."but not to destabilize the situation." Bainimarama said Qarase and Kinivuwai will be "put on a plane and sent to Vanuabalavu (Qarase's remote home

island where he was exiled for 9 months) if they continue to give false statements about the military council." Bainimarama suggested that Qarase was trying to destabilize the national situation so "the Australian military can come back in. That's what Qarase wanted in the first place. Maybe he's still after that." Bainimarama reportedly drew a parallel to Pakistan, saying former PMs Sharif and Bhutto ended up exiled after the Musharraf coup. Qarase so far has declined to comment about the latest events.

Police in the visible lead; streets quiet

¶4. (U) Bainimarama said police will man the checkpoints during the state of emergency. The military will not be on the streets and will only act under Bainimarama's command. The streets of Suva remain quiet.

Comment

¶5. (C) Bainimarama claimed today that the people of Fiji are "enjoying prosperity and progress toward returning the country to democratic rule." He proposed that Qarase is "undoing" that. We hear complaints from many quarters that Bainimarama receives his view of Fiji from a small group who aim to please him. It appears obvious that Bainimarama did not expect Qarase to gain traction and take an aggressive public approach on his return from exile; and the "military council" is sensing, contrary to its hope, that Qarase remains a political force who has quickly generated a degree of momentum. When the state of emergency ended in May, we heard the military council opposed the change. The Qarase situation has given opportunity to redress that "mistake."

SUVA 00000436 002 OF 002

¶6. (C) An interesting development in the past few days is public acknowledgment by Bainimarama and his military spokesman of the military council's role. We were aware that the senior military leadership, clearly led by Bainimarama, was still setting policy, reportedly more so than the interim cabinet on many issues; but the interim cabinet was the public face of the IG. As previously reported, rumors are circulating of serious frictions within the interim cabinet that may result in a reshuffle. That situation, plus an increasing sense of political pressure within the ethnic-Fijian community, may help explain the military council's increased visibility: a reminder to anyone who might plot disorder that the military, with its weapons, remains very much in charge.

DINGER